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ABSTRACT

Issues and factors related to the continuation of state energy education programs are discussed. The turmoil over energy's changing position among public priorities, limited federal and state budgets available for meeting energy education needs, substantive changes in both federally-sponsored and state-supported programs, and concomitant changes in personnel have affected virtually every state education agency and energy office. Because of the declining federal role in energy education matters, the disappearance of a national consensus that energy and energy education are among the highest public priorities, and interstate fiscal disparities, a great variation in energy education programs exists among and within states. However, four trends in state energy agencies and four patterns in their handling of energy education have been identified. Although the reaction in some states has been to relinquish leadership in energy education, states maintaining their programs are faced with the challenge of doing as much as possible with fewer resources. The ECS Energy and Education Project is one resource available to assist state officials in fulfilling their energy and education responsibilities. The project collects, analyzes, and disseminates information about changed federal and state policies, programs, budgets and personnel, and provides referrals to other sources of expertise. (Author/JN)

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THE STATUS OF ENERGY EDUCATION IN THE STATES

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Education Commission of the States
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THE STATUS OF ENERGY EDUCATION IN THE STATES

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Energy education varies among states with respect to program content, target audience, fiscal support and organizational structure within state government. Generally, a state's assumption of responsibility to educate the public regarding energy matters depends upon a belief among influential education decision makers that addressing energy issues is an important public priority. Closely associated with this philosophical commitment is the willingness of state officials to allocate funds to support energy education programs. Obviously, such a willingness depends on both the condition of the state budget and the extent to which other priorities successfully compete with energy education for limited dollars. A critical factor, particularly in states allocating little or no state money to energy education programs, is the extent to which the state has retained carryover funds to support ongoing activities and/or anticipates co tinuing federal contributions to the state and local assistance programs that have provided a foundation for most state energy offices. (Since the demise of the Energy and Education Action Center and the consolidation of a myriad of categorical programs into education block grants in 1982, the U.S. Department of Education has provided virtually no financial assistance for energy education.)

Although interest in energy education is certainly not at a peak when compared to the 1973-74 and 1979 oil embargo years, the outlook for continued state involvement is less bleak than it was

just a year ago. The reasons for this shift from pessimism to uncertainty -- or even possible stability -- are many. First, and perhaps most important, is the fact that the public has remained conscious of energy as a continuing issue, albeit not one of crisis dimensions, due to the combination of consistently rising energy prices, particularly for natural gas and electricity, and inconsistent predictions regarding future energy prices, alternatives and their availability. Second, and very much related to the public's perception of energy as an ongoing concern, is the probable continuation of DOE funding for a variety of conservation programs implemented by state energy offices, at somewhat higher levels for fiscal year 1983 than for fiscal year 1982. (However, it must be noted that most of the energy education programs supported by DOE's Office of Energy Research have been zeroed out of both the proposed 1983 budget and the continuing resolution. Therefore, virtually all DOE programs directed at the elementary/secondary curriculum and at teacher training will be eliminated unless Congress reinstates them prior to finalizing the 1983 budget). Third, states have already reacted to significant cuts in federally sponsored energy and education programs last year. These cutbacks were responsible for elimination and reassignment of staff and for some loss of morale and services in many agencies. However, most observers feel that the necessary cuts have already occurred and, therefore, fiscal year 1983 will not be another year of retrenchment in most state energy offices.

In spite of these somewhat stablizing factors, the future for

energy education in the states remains unsettled due to such countervailing forces as fiscal constraints in the states, the lack of a final federal budget for the current fiscal year and inevitable political changes yet to be made following the November elections. Most states are experiencing revenue shortfalls, primarily due to the recession and changes in federal contributions to state coffers. Tight state budgets have affected virtually every category of public expenditure, including both energy and education programs, as well as their intersection. The lack of consensus over the timing and final content of federal budgetary decisions has caused state officials to prepare for a range of fiscal and programmatic scenarios, including the possibility, however unlikely, of additional cuts. Finally, there is an inevitable time lag for newly elected officials to make budgetary and other substantive decisions, which may or may not cause a new wave of programmatic and personnel changes. The combination of those factors suggesting stability and those suggesting uncertainty makes two things clear: First, less support for energy education will be available from the federal government. Second, states and localities will have the primary responsibility to make decisions regarding the proper level of financial and programmatic commitment to energy and education concerns.

It is because of the declining federal role in energy education matters, the disappearance of a national consensus that energy and energy education are among the highest public priorities, and interstate fiscal disparities that we see great

variety in the way that energy education is handled among states and within states, by the education agency and/or energy office. Nevertheless, some patterns are emerging.

In state education agencies, four trends can be observed nationwide:

1. Energy education specialist positions, which were commonly established during the seventies, often have been eliminated and the associated responsibilities assigned to curriculum specialists in science and/or social studies. In those states where energy education has always been one of the many responsibilities of a curriculum specialist, the amount of time such persons devote to the energy aspect of their work has decreased.

2. Fewer new materials are being produced; instead, there is a tendency to revise and repackage materials produced several years ago.

3. Some states have virtually eliminated the energy education responsibilities within the state education agency and instead are assuming that energy education is a local school district responsibility.

4. Although energy can theoretically be supported as a curricular topic within the block grant structure, it comes as no surprise that energy education has not been able to compete successfully with other pressing demands for the limited funds available.

State energy offices also show four patterns in their handling of energy education today:

1. In many states the energy office is no longer an independent agency; instead, it has become a division within another department, such as regulatory agencies or natural resources.

2. With respect to budgets, most state energy offices have already felt the impact of decreased federal funding during fiscal year 1982 and have pared down staff and programs accordingly. This is particularly true in those states where the energy office has relied almost entirely on federal funds. Only a few states that have augmented federal allocations with a significant level of state support have avoided making

substantial cutbacks. However, depending on the condition of the 1983 state budget, such cutbacks may have been delayed rather than avoided. Similarly, states that have underspent previous federal allotments, enabling them to insulate themselves from having to react to federal cutbacks, may have only postponed taking actions similar to those already taken in other jurisdictions.

3. State energy offices have tended to retain some public information programs supported through the Energy Extension Service and other federally funded, state-administered conservation programs that have an excellent chance of being refunded, such as the Institutional Building Grants Program. (Most other state energy office activities related to the elementary/secondary school curriculum have been eliminated.)

4. The combination of last year's cutbacks in federal funding and the current uncertainty over future funding for state energy offices has been responsible for personnel changes within virtually every state energy office. As is the case within state education agencies, many offices have eliminated their education specialists; others have retained these positions, generally within the Energy Extension Service structure. Regardless of the specific programmatic assignments, there has been considerable turnover among those individuals responsible for energy education and/or public information programs. This, in turn, has led to problems of unintentional overlapping and/or overlooked activities within and among states until staff have become familiar with their new responsibilities.

In summary, the turmoil over energy's changing position among public priorities, limited federal and state budgets available for meeting energy education needs, substantive changes in both federally sponsored and state-supported programs designed to address people's need for more energy-related knowledge, and the concomitant changes in personnel have hit virtually every state education agency and energy office. The reaction in some states has been to relinquish leadership in energy education. And, in the vacuum left by state inaction, the private sector and/or local

school districts have sometimes chosen to initiate and implement energy- related activities. In those states that have retained energy education programs, staff persons are faced with the challenge of how to do as much as possible with fewer resources. To maximize efficiency, needless duplication of effort must be eliminated. Therefore, networking among officials responsible for energy and education programs in education agencies and energy offices, both within states and among states, will be essential. However, due to the need to cut expenditures in virtually every state agency, the most important networking tools must be one's telephone, one's stationery, and perhaps most important, one's creativity and knowledge of available sources of expertise.

The ECS Energy and Education Project is one resource available to assist state officials in fulfilling their energy and education responsibilities. The project has been funded by the U.S. Department of Energy since 1978 to help education policy makers in their efforts to meet the energy and education needs of their constituents. The primary focus for the current grant period is to assist state leaders address the consequences of the unfolding realignment of federal and state responsibilities in the area of energy and education. In carrying out this task, the project collects, analyzes and disseminates information about changing federal and state policies, programs, budgets and personnel, and provides referrals to other sources of expertise.